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AUTHOR Levin, Benjamin
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ABSTRACT

An overview of the accessibility of postsecondary education in Canada is presented. The issues are dealt with in a brief, therefore necessarily simplified manner, and universities receive more attention than colleges, largely because there is considerably more data about them. Canadian postsecondary education is the constitutional responsibility of the provinces. The national government has no ministry or office of education at all. The development of postsecondary education in Canada increased dramatically after World War II and especially in the 1950s and 1960s. From 1981 to 1984, enrollment rose rapidly and has continued since then at very high levels. Several conceptions of accessibility are discussed, with three views outlined. One is concerned with the total number of places available for qualified applicants; the second concerns the distribution of available places among institutions and programs, and the third has to do with who in the population actually attends postsecondary education. The future for accessibility questions is examined, and it is suggested that: (1) demand will likely continue at very high levels; (2) there is likely to be increasing interest in alternatives to conventional education programs; and (3) significant progress in equity issues in the distribution of available places to different people is possible. Issues of accessibility are very likely to remain squarely on the agenda for postsecondary education. Contains 18 references. (SM)

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ACCESSIBILITY TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN CANADA

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Dr. Benjamin Levin
Executive Director
Universities Grants Commission
and
Department of Educational Administration
Faculty of Education
University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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Introduction

This paper is intended to give an overview of accessibility to post-secondary education in Canada, as part of this symposium on comparative perspectives on accessibility. The paper has three main sections. First, a brief description of the Canadian post-secondary education system, including some of its history, is offered. Secondly, the current status of accessibility to post-secondary education is described. Finally, an attempt is made to define the challenges which the issue of accessibility to post-secondary education presents in the coming years.

These topics will all be dealt with in a brief, and therefore necessarily simplified manner. As with any overview, important aspects of the issues under discussion will not be raised. Similarly, the paper will tend to treat Canadian post-secondary education as a unitary phenomenon, when in practice it is far from that. In addition, universities will receive more attention than colleges in what follows, largely because there is considerably more data about them.

It might be usual to present, early in the paper, a definition of accessibility. However, that in itself is one of the themes to be discussed later on. Suffice it to say at this point that there are diverging views about the meaning of accessibility, and that these divergences have had important policy implications.

An overview of Canadian post-secondary education

For those who may not be familiar with it, I will begin with a brief and simplified description of post-secondary education in Canada.

Canada is a federal state, in which education is the constitutional responsibility of the provinces. Indeed, the national government has no ministry or office of education at all. The federal government does, however, play a major role in post-secondary education in a number of ways.

- It provides revenue transfers to the provinces which are used in part to fund post-secondary education.
- It provides most of the funding for research in universities.
- It provides some direct funding to institutions through a variety of targeted programs.
- It provides financial support to individuals attending post-secondary education.
- It formulates many policies which have either direct or indirect effects on post-secondary institutions, in such diverse areas as taxation, employment equity, external affairs, and so on.

In fiscal year 1987-88, the federal government spent about $1.3 billion directly, and several billion in fiscal transfers (the exact amount is a matter of serious dispute between the federal and provincial governments) in this way, out of estimated total spending on post-secondary education of $11 billion (Secretary of State, 1989).

There are two main elements to the post-secondary system (if it can accurately be termed a system at all). The larger is the network of Canadian universities, of which there are, depending on how one counts, about 70, enrolling 500,000 full-time and 300,000 part-time students (Statistics Canada, 1988). Universities in Canada can be described as autonomous, publicly funded organizations. They receive from 60% to 80% of their operating funds from provincial governments (with the remainder coming primarily from tuition

fees). They are normally created through provincial legislation, and have their own governing boards, although in some cases provincial governments appoint a majority of the members of these boards. They are thus heavily influenced, but not directed or run, by governments.

Community colleges are, in most provinces, providers of technical and vocational education and training. The community college system developed in the 1960's, as a response to the boom in the number of young people and the perceived need for more training in technical skill areas. There are now some 200 colleges, enrolling more than 300,000 students (Statistics Canada, 1988). In most of Canada, community colleges provide training up to two years in length. In most areas, very little linkage exists between the community colleges and the universities. The most important exception is the province of Quebec, in which all students attend community colleges (called CEGEPS), either before going on to university, or for technical education.

Community colleges tend to be more closely controlled by provincial governments than are universities, and are also heavily influenced by federal government funding of labour force training, which often involves federal purchases of training places in the colleges.

Development of post-secondary education in Canada

To understand the current situation in regard to accessibility in Canada, it is necessary to sketch briefly the development of post-secondary education in the country. As in many other countries, post-secondary education grew very rapidly in Canada after World War II, and especially in the 1950's and 1960's. Fuelled by economic growth, rising expectations, and the large increase in the number of young people, post-secondary institutions grew both in size and number. Full-time post-secondary enrolment grew from

163,000 (or 9.7% of the 18-24 age group) in 1960 to 761,000 (or 23.6% of the same cohort) in 1985 (Fortin, 1987). New universities were created, and entire community college systems came into being in several provinces, or were substantially expanded in others (Dennison and Gallagher, 1986).

For many years, this growth in numbers constituted increasing accessibility. That is, accessibility was understood to be a function of the total number of students admitted to the system. But the situation began to change in the mid 1970's. Enrolment growth levelled, and was projected to decline as the size of the 18 to 24 year old age cohort decreased. Money was much scarcer, and increases in grants and budgets were much smaller than had been the case.

A big surprise came in the early part of the current decade. Despite all the demographic trends, which showed that enrolment should have declined, university enrolment rose rapidly from 1981 to 1984, and has continued since then at very high levels. The increase was made up partly of a higher participation rate by high school leavers, and partly of growing numbers of adult students - largely part-time and largely female. There were substantial shifts in the demographic make-up of the university population. For example, females constituted 30% of full-time enrolment in 1960, but just over 50% by 1985 (Fortin, 1987). The percentage of university undergraduates aged 25 or more rose from 8% in 1972 to 13% in 1987 (derived from Statistics Canada, 1976, 1989). Part-time enrolment in universities grew from 47% of the number of full-time students in 1972 to 60% by 1987 (Statistics Canada, 1976, 1989).

By the 1970's, researchers had already come to the conclusion that the vast increase in enrolments in colleges and universities hid continuing disparities in the kinds of people who attended.

Analysis of university enrolees, particularly, showed that, even with the changes of the 1970's, students were predominantly from higher socio-economic groups, and that some important groups - women, native people, the disabled - were either missing entirely, or missing from some key fields of study (Anisef, 1986; Guppy, 1984).

Conceptions of Accessibility

There are several different ideas about what accessibility means; ideas which have also shifted over time. Three views of accessibility are outlined. One is concerned with the total number of places available for qualified applicants. A second concerns the distribution of available places among institutions and programs. And a third conception has to do with who in the population actually attends post-secondary education.

The issue of the total number of post-secondary places to be provided remains important, especially in relation to the number of applicants. In some jurisdictions, and for some people, the key question is whether there is room in the institutions for every student who meets the usual entrance standards and wishes to attend. In the province of Ontario, for example, there has been great debate about the continued currency of a previous government's pledge of "a place for every qualified student".

The climate of limited funding which began in Canada in the mid to late 1970's has had a considerable effect on this first view of accessibility. The temptation for institutions to reduce enrolments, and therefore costs, as a way of meeting financial pressures, has been very strong. Such reductions were typically phrased as being in defence of quality.

The relation of numbers of students to concerns about quality has become more pronounced in the 1980's, as part of a growing overall concern with quality. There can be no doubt that enrolment in post-secondary education has remained at very high levels while financing has not grown nearly as rapidly in recent years. However, the link between numbers and quality remains uncertain. There has been no empirical indication that quality in post-secondary education, despite higher enrolments, has declined over the past decade (e.g. Fortin, 1987; Skolnik, 1984), if only because there is no consensus as to what quality in post-secondary education means. This link between quality and accessibility, will, however, come up again later in this paper.

While there has been increasing talk about quality in post-secondary education, there is clear evidence that the public continues to be at least as concerned about accessibility. The trend may be different in other countries, but in Canada the curcial importance of accessibility emerged clearly as one of the key areas of agreement from the 1987 National Forum on Post-Secondary Education, which was jointly sponsored by the federal and provincial governments, and involved several hundred delegates from all sectors and areas of the country (IRPP, 1988, p. 94 ff.).

A related aspect of accessibility has, however, been largely ignored. Almost no attention has been paid to the issue of the distribution of places among programs within the institutions. It has always been the case that some programs, both in colleges and universities, restricted numbers. It has also been accepted in Canada (unlike some European countries) that individual colleges and universities could limit enrolment and turn away qualified applicants. Accessibility has been seen as a general right, but not as a right in relation to every area of study. Many university faculties, and many community college programs have either very long waiting lists, or very difficult admissions processes, or

both, with no public outcry about the denial of access.

In many cases, as noted earlier, institutions have reduced enrolments in particular programs as a way of coping with funding limitations. In some cases, government have acted to influence the number of places in particular fields. Notable examples are the expansion of engineering programs in the late 1970's and early 1980's, and the attempted contraction of enrolments in medical faculties, as governments have argued that they neither needed nor could afford to pay more doctors.

There have also been significant shifts among programs over the last decade, based substantially on student demand. The sixfold growth of community college enrolments, which are generally in technical areas, between 1960 and 1985 is one indicator of shifts in demand for advanced education (IRPP, 1987). Within the universities, the number of degrees granted in business and commerce rose by more than triple the rate of growth in degrees as a whole; while social science degrees also increased much more quickly than total degrees (derived from Statistics Canada, 1976, 1989). Computer science enrolments grew rapidly, and have recently declined, along with perceived job prospects. At the community colleges, new areas in the services and technologies have emerged, while traditional areas such as trades have declined substantially.

Yet this question of distribution of students among programs has received little attention. The shifts which have occurred have largely been ad-hoc, and not based, for the most part, on careful analysis of need or demand. We simply accept that only a few doctors or lawyers will be educated, compared with much larger numbers of students in the arts or sciences. We accept two year waiting periods for technical training programs. We tend to accept, although less readily, the right of institutions to reduce numbers in popular courses. On the other hand, we also tend to

accept the right of governments to influence the distribution of places. What we have not done in any serious way is debated the issues of distribution of places, and resources, among types and levels of programs.

The third aspect of accessibility concerns the demographic makeup of the student body. Over the past decade, increasing attention has been devoted to the equitable distribution of those places among the population. This development was in keeping with a general inclination growing in the 1970's to think of education as a rationing device, and therefore to be concerned with who recieved rations, as well as how much was distributed overall (see, for example, the very influential work by Jencks et al, 1974). It was also influenced by the growth in thinking about rights of groups in society - the same trend which led to the adoption of a constitutional Charter of Rights in Canada in 1982, and to the still-growing emphasis on the status of subpopulations within the society.

We have also learned quite a bit over the last decade or two about why people go on to post-secondary education, and what is required to provide effective education. We know that post-secondary attendance is influenced by many factors, including students' previous academic achievement and self concept of ability; the educational background and income of parents; the intentions of friends and siblings; the availability of financial resources; the availability of programs nearby and at appropriate times; the ability to gain entry to the program of choice; perception of the institution as supportive or not; availability of other supports, such as child care or transportation; alternative opportunities available, such as work; and chance or luck. There is also general agreement that the first two of the above have the strongest impact (Stager, 1984; Wolfle, 1985; Anisef, 1986; Leslie and Brinkman, 1987), but that no single factor is in itself a very good predictor

of attendance or success at university or college.

We know that people who may lack the normal level of background and preparation, and whose circumstances may be different from those of the "typical" student can be educated effectively if the appropriate programs and supports are made available (see Unruh and Levin, in press). There is no longer any ground for the view that advanced education should, on grounds of ability, be limited to a small number of people.

The basic concept informing this second view of accessibility might be called "equality of condition" (e.g. Unruh and Levin, in press). Equality of condition is the notion that people's opportunity to receive post-secondary education should depend on their ability and motivation, and not on such external circumstances as their income, or the kind of family they grew up in.

This conception of accessibility has very significant implications for the way that post-secondary institutions operate. Colleges and universities have tended to see the responsibility for a student's success as resting in the student's hands. The institutions (especially universities; colleges have been more attuned to these issues) did not see themselves as having any direct responsibility for students beyond the provision of competent instruction, and some support services for those who sought them. Indeed, especially in the universities there continues to be a strong belief that a certain amount of student failure is an indication of rigour, and therefore of program quality.

The Future of Accessibility Issues

What follows is an attempt to see what the future for accessibility questions might look like. It is a compound of prediction and wishful thinking; the reader is free to decide which comments

belong in which category.

In relation to the total number of places available in universities and colleges, there is every reason to think that demand will continue at very high levels. Considerable evidence, much of it recent, suggests that both the demand from potential students for post-secondary education and the economic and social demand for post-secondary graduates are likely to remain high or even to increase substantially (e.g. Mincer, 1989; Murphy and Welch, 1989). The increasing numbers of part-time students, of females wishing to upgrade their educational qualifications, and of other groups wishing to obtain their share of economic reward suggest, indeed, that the potential demand for post-secondary education is limited only by the ability of institutions to provide appropriate programs and services.

This is, in one sense, a very bright picture. But it does present some challenges. For there is likely to be increasing interest in alternatives to conventional educational programs. There is already a belief that the private and non-profit sectors spend more on educating their employees than do all the formal educational institutions. Whether this is true or not, there will likely be increasing pressure on post-secondary institutions to do a better job of providing programs in alternative formats, of recognizing both the formal training and experiential learning of potential students, and, in general, of becoming part of a more integrated network of educational opportunities for people.

In regard to the distribution of places among program areas, there is likely to continue to be a combination of painful adjustment and the avoidance of painful adjustment. That is, some changes in the distribution of places will undoubtedly occur, while in other cases inappropriate distributions are likely to continue. Both these tendencies will occur for very good reasons, having to do with

great pressure to change, on the one hand, and the great difficulty institutions experience in changing, on the other hand. The entire process will, of course, be made much more difficult by the history of failure which labour market planning has had. That is, given our inability to predict labour market needs very far in advance, and given the long time horizons which presently exist to train and educate people in many fields, there will likely continue to be significant mismatches between what we provide, what students want, and what employers and society would like. One can only hope that there will be more debate about these matters than has occurred in the past decade.

In Canada, this issue, like so many others, is rendered even more problematic by our federal system. While the provinces have responsibility for education, responsibility for labour market matters is shared between federal and provincial governments. It is, therefore, very difficult to get any consensus on steps which should be taken to improve the adaptability of our training and education programs, and equally difficult for us to work as if we had a national labour market at all.

Finally, in regard to issues of equity in the distribution of available places to different people, we are at a point where some very significant progress is possible. Taking equality of condition seriously as a concept, however, would imply some substantial changes in the way colleges and universities go about their business. Equality of condition implies that post-secondary institutions must be more than passive recipients of students, who are largely left to their own devices in terms of being able to benefit from and succeed in programs. Rather, colleges and universities would need to be concerned with the differential effects of their admission practices, teaching methods, program organization, and support services on different kinds of students. They would need to take seriously the obligation to provide an

education appropriate to the student, with all that implies. They would, in short, need to see themselves as at least partly responsible for what their students learned and whether they succeeded.

Whether these sorts of changes will occur is uncertain. There are strong pressures within post-secondary institutions for continuity of practice. However, there are equally strong pressures elsewhere for change. Some impetus may come, although it is easy to exaggerate this point, from alternative forms of training and education. Some impetus may come from government; in many provinces, including my own, governments have provided funding specifically to improve opportunities for target groups. And it would be a disservice to suggest that within the institutions themselves there were not many people interested in the idea of equality of condition, however they might articulate it.

What can be said with some assurance is that issues of accessibility are very likely to remain squarely on the agenda for post-secondary education. In all its aspects, accessibility to post-secondary education will be of considerable concern not only to the institutions themselves, but also to government and to the Canadian public.

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